

All Saints' Day 2018

Sermon 11.4.18

Scripture:

Isaiah 25:6-9

On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear. ⁷ And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; ⁸ he will swallow up death forever. Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken. ⁹ It will be said on that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us. This is the Lord for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.

Revelation 21:1-6

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ² And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; ⁴ he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away." ⁵ And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true." ⁶ Then he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.

Today is All Saints' Day, or at least that's what we're calling today. All Saints' Day is actually November 1st, following All Hallows' Eve on the evening and night of October 31st, and preceding All Souls' Day, which would be November 2nd. All together these are Allhallowtide, a church season most Congregationalists would never have heard of. With each descending step of the Protestant Reformation, from the high church traditions of Roman, Anglican, and Lutheran, to the lower traditions of Scottish Presbyterians and English Methodists, to the Congregationalists and Anabaptists, the Quakers, the Shakers: with each step down the ladder, these holidays fell away, leaving the lowest-church Protestants with just Sunday.

I'm okay with that. I happen to like Sunday.

But there's some irony in this, too—because it's the very spirit of low-church Congregationalism that feels most at work in a holiday like All Saints' Day.

It was Thomas Carlyle who formalized the thesis that history is the story of the decisions and actions of great men. In his book, published in 1841, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*, he argued that history is best seen as a series of great men who, by their wisdom, intelligence, charisma, courage, or use of political power, gave shape and direction to history.

Moreover, he thought that the study of these great men, and the study of history in this mode, was “profitable” to one’s own heroic side, that by examining the lives of such heroes, “one could not help but uncover something about one’s own true nature.”

He had his critics, of course—like Herbert Spencer, a contemporary of Carlyle, who claimed that attributing historical events to the decisions of individuals was a hopelessly primitive, childish, and unscientific position. It was the scholarly equivalent of an eye roll and an “oh brother.” In his book, *The Study of Sociology*, Spencer wrote, “You must admit that the genesis of a great man depends on the long series of complex influences which has produced the race in which he appears, and the social state into which that race has slowly grown... Before he can remake his society, his society must make him.”

I’d venture the guess that most serious thinking about history favors Spencer’s view: many factors contribute to history’s unfolding as it does. I’d venture the guess that most serious consideration of so-called “great men” understands their greatness as sourced from well beyond their own internal resources. Sure, there’re Ayn Rand and her acolytes. But there are (I’d wager) more of the likes of Leonid Grinin, for example, Russian philosopher still at work today. He wrote of the great man theory: “Owing to his personal features, or to a chance, or to his social standing, or to the peculiarity of the epoch, an individual by the very fact of his existence, by his ideas or actions (or inaction) directly or indirectly, during his lifetime or after his death may have such an influence upon his own or another society which can be recognized significant as he left a noticeable mark (positive, negative or unambiguous) in history and in the further development of society...”—all of which is to suggest that history isn’t simply a matter of heroism, and that landing prominently as a point on the timeline of history isn’t simply a matter of “greatness” or “gumption” or “grit; it’s lots and lots of things.

But not all thinking is serious thinking.

I love me a super hero story, though mostly because I find them fascinating rather than persuasive. I might find myself immersed in Batman’s world or Daredevil’s world, or even the world of James Bond or Jason Bourne, these whose worlds more resemble our actual world than Gotham does, or Smallville. I might become entirely seduced by these stories for a night at the movies or a week of binge-watching TV. But eventually I come out the other side and wonder, “What was *that* about?”

No, really. What is that about?

It actually feels like a crucial question lately because our whole society feels to me subsumed by a collective belief in superheroes—and not only because every other movie to come out of Hollywood would have us all lurched back into that mode, reboots of reboots. Our whole body politic feels utterly persuaded by the power of a great man, and him alone—our only hope.

Isn't that what Leia pleaded of Obi-Wan? "You're our only hope."

Isn't this what Donald Trump foreswore before his mob of fans? "I alone can fix it."

I'm sorry to have to say, seductive as this notion is, it is also a profoundly undemocratic one, is actually a quite authoritarian one; and I think we need to flush our system of it, critique it of its seductive power.

I'm sorrier still to have to say that I think Christianity has lately contributed mightily to this persistent wish "Somebody *sa-a-a-ave* me!" went the theme song of the most recent Superman TV show, "Smallville." It might as well be Christian rock.

Christianity done well, which is to say as it's been classically done, with careful Trinitarian thought, confesses the Holy Spirit as equal in power and importance to Jesus. The saving work of Jesus on the cross is redounded by the Holy Spirit throughout history. The momentous events of Jesus' death and resurrection are more broadly played out across all history, and by the Holy Spirit, which moves through history, and calls and quickens into being the Church, and convicts "the saints" of every age and epoch, convicts them—convicts *us*—into decision and action to a good end.

But this theology of the Church has fallen away. More evangelical and fundamentalist thought even casts doubt on the Church at all. Everything true and trustworthy comes down to the Bible and the individual "believer". Meanwhile, congregations become audiences (if congregational life is a part of it at all), sanctuaries become stadiums or amphitheaters, and pastors become the strong man up front of the mega-church. Worship has become a spectacle, and membership in the church slips into a cult of personality.

It's not difficult, then, to understand why so many white Evangelicals could get behind Donald Trump.

All Saints' Day insists on a different social imaginary—not one in which we're to await a superhero who will save the day but one in which we all have the capacity, not to mention the call, to decide and act in service of saving grace.

One of the more known saints we've lost in recent weeks is the Rev. Eugene Peterson. Of course, I call him out with some irony because the whole point of "all saints" is the "all" of it. But that was the irony of his notoriety. A Presbyterian minister who served for twenty-eight years a congregation of about 500 members, with 250 in worship on Sunday, all in Bel Air, Maryland, a town with a population of 8,000 people, he was nonetheless noteworthy enough to be memorialized in the *New York Times*.

"Pastor Pete," as he was called, became known for the more than thirty books he would publish following his many years in the parish, more than a few of which were inflected with his commitment to the ordinary things of life and work, of ministry and thought. One of his best-loved, *The Pastor: A Memoir*, according to his obituary, simply "recounted his years of service as the pastor of Christ Our King, a long panorama of births, deaths, ceremonies, sermonizing and counseling." In short, he didn't do anything great. He just did life reliably and consistently and in service of long relationship.

His highest selling book, though, was a reinterpretation of the Bible, and with this he really hit the big time. Called *The Message*, its aim was to cast in contemporary language these ancient texts, by which many, many people found new meaning in this old story, as was his aim. Of those to embrace the book, most were evangelicals. But Peterson didn't join the pantheon of notable evangelicals, as he could well have. The obituary notes, "While televangelists like Billy Graham, Oral Roberts, Bob Jones Sr. and Joel Osteen reached millions with more impersonal and lucrative mass-media techniques, Mr. Peterson deplored modern megachurches, virtual religions online, televised preaching and what is known as the gospel of prosperity, which propounds the popular notion that God rewards the faithful in material ways." Pastor Pete, it seems, loved congregations, ordinary, plain. This, he apparently thought, was how the gospel might truly (might *only* truly) be transmitted. "You can't do it wholesale," he once said. "You just can't."

To this, I'd add, no one can do it for you, on your behalf, instead of you. The saints of old: these are to include you. When the days pass into years, and the years into centuries, and centuries into epochs of history that yet roll on, all those saints that made history more blessed than not: you're to be among them. And you remember some them, right? The more recent ones, the still living ones (to be included in All Souls' Day), the ones who made it so you find yourself here this morning; the people who taught you what it is to love your neighbor, to put someone else's needs

ahead of your own, even to take a hit so someone else can thrive; the people whose “heroism” was commonplace but no less inspiring that you might become similarly “heroic”: you’re to be as this to someone else.

You’re to be as Christ to someone else, just as a long history of others have been as Christ to you.

We had a special town meeting the other night in Lenox. Among the measures up for vote was to regulate short-term rentals, the sort you’d find on Airbnb and VRBO. The proposed legislation was imperfect to be sure, but it was the result of hours of hard work and was attempting to get a handle on something that’s altogether new, if not in type then certainly in scale. The Internet makes possible frequent, short-term coming-and-going in otherwise settled neighborhoods unlike anything we’ve seen since property ownership became a foundational norm and value in our society. The effect is that mid-priced, family-style homes in otherwise cozy residential neighborhoods are being bought up and used as short term rentals run by absentee landlords who, though they might have good intentions as regards their property and the neighborhood, simply aren’t there to make real their notional commitments.

And that makes all the difference.

The meeting itself left me thoroughly disheartened. All the opponents of regulation spoke in terms of individual rights, while not at all in terms of responsibility to the neighborhood or their neighbors. “Your property, your choice,” their lawn signs even said. “Your home, your rights.” Really, if they accounted for their neighbors at all, it was to reassure everyone that they only rent out to “nice people,” whom they’ve gotten to know on-line and have vetted to the degree that they can.

It should be said, of course, that considering the quality of the people being chosen as temporary tenants runs the risk of violating democratic values of equal treatment for public accommodation. After all, it’s not only “nice” people who should have access to publicly offered rentals. No, for “nice” can mean all sorts of things. For some landlords, “nice” means white or straight, so being asked to trust the judgment of a landlord as to whom will be accommodated offers cold comfort indeed.

But this is all beside the point, since the “quality” of the people being accommodated doesn’t seem to have been of concern to those proposing regulation, and certainly isn’t for me in

favoring regulation. It's this: it's the foreclosing on the possibility of building up relationship with neighbors in the slow, subtle way that this has long been done because the places that would once have been felt as neighborhoods are now something else—every person a tourist, every dwelling a stopover, the whole world (it seems) a place for casual consuming rather than investing and taking care.

Worst of all was the discovery that this is apparently not of much value to most other people, and that those who do value it are of older generations. Everyone to speak in terms of *our* neighbors or *our* neighborhoods were a generation older than I—the ones who'd know by heart Joni Mitchell's musing, "Don't it always seem to go that you don't know what you've got 'til it's gone?" Though a generation too late, I'm also a lover of Joni Mitchell's music, and I think this lyrical insight is true as far as it goes. But then, going further, you don't even know that "it's" gone because you never had it in the first place. You were born too late.

Could it be that my generation is the last to have grown up with any semblance of neighborhood, any sense of place, and any real mandate that you're not to be in it merely for yourself?

Mark Lilla seems to think so.

Professor of Political Science at Columbia University, Mr. Lilla wrote in his book *The Once and Future Liberal* of his growing suspicion that the Reagan era had as a deep an impact on those who identify with the political left in America as it did on those of the political right.

Ronald Reagan is, as we all know, a hero of the right wing, and is therefore someone many profess as deeply impactful on their value-system and their expectations of public institutions. But Mr. Lilla seems to think even those who wouldn't claim him as a hero yet imbibed of his valuing the individual over the group, and believing in a good life that though comes at no cost to the self. Worse, we're all, right and left, now living it out.

Remember, in his first inaugural address, newly made President Reagan spoke loftily of a soldier in the 2nd World War, Martin Treptow, who died in battle. "We are told that on his body," Mr. Reagan intoned, "was found a diary. On the flyleaf under the heading, 'My Pledge,' he had written these words: 'America must win this war. Therefore, I will work, I will save, I will sacrifice, I will endure, I will fight cheerfully and do my utmost, as if the issue of the whole struggle depended on me alone.'"

Taking a literal page from Treptow's diary, Mr. Reagan spoke now of the United States in 1980 (when I was ten years old, so the 80s really are the decade when my generation came of age). "The crisis we are facing today does not require of us the kind of sacrifice that Martin Treptow and so many thousands of others were called upon to make. It does require, however, our best effort, and our willingness to believe in ourselves and to believe in our capacity to perform great deeds; to believe that together, with God's help, we can and will resolve the problems, which now confront us. And, after all, why shouldn't we believe that? We are Americans."

It's breathtaking, don't you think? The wishfulness of what might otherwise have been a galvanizing speech? It's unnerving, at least I think—the costlessness of this call? It amounts to such anodyne encouragement—and this from someone thought a great orator.

It's also untrue.

It is *not* enough to try our best and to believe in ourselves. It is *not* enough, in our aim to be a body politic, to demonstrate a willingness to believe—this being about three degrees away from anything actual. It is *not* enough, in our mandate to build up the beloved community, to believe in our own greatness. We don't need each to have self-esteem. We need each to be self-giving. And, no, sacrifice of the sort offered on the beaches of Normandy isn't required of us, thank God. But that's not to say sacrifice of any sort isn't required of us.

It is.

And this is good news.

I think it's a drag not to be needed, so I for one hear word that we are all indeed needed as a life-giving word. While the ship of state founders—or of community or church; while all these binding ties come loose and once-members drift away: I hear the call, "All hands on deck," as good news indeed.

Life without limits is monstrous, while life that is self-limiting for the sake of neighbors, strangers, any who are other than you: this is saintly, a vessel (the only fitting vessel) for the carrying out of love.

Happy All Saints' Day, all ye saints. It's a good thing you're here. We need all the help we can get.

Thanks be to God.